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ABSTRACT

The basic issues faced by organizational communication consultants can be considered according to five general principles. First, the communication consultant must be objective and unbiased in interacting with the client. When a conflict of values occurs, objectivity and honesty can be maintained if the consultant assumes responsibility for any personal decisions, recommendations, and changes discussed with the client. Second, communication consultants must maintain high standards of professional competence by providing only those services for which they have been uniquely trained and by admitting limitations regarding areas of expertise that are outside of their scope. Third, strict standards of confidentiality must be maintained, not only on ethical grounds, but for legal reasons as well. Fourth, the consultant must be familiar with the ethical standards of the profession, particularly those that govern the moral and legal practices of the corporation and the demands that the corporation places on the individual employee. Finally, the individual must not only be aware of the impact that his/her consulting practices have on the corporation, but must regularly evaluate and revise these practices. (MAI)

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"The Hippocratic Oath and
Standards for Organizational
Communication Consultants"

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Part of the difficulty of developing general ethical codes for group and organizational consultation is that the present practitioners of the art are drawn from numerous rather than single primary professional identifications. . . . The answer may lie in part in developing cross-professional associations of consultants who can work toward developing general "advices" to typical ethical problems of consultation. The answer may lie in part in specializing existing codes within particular professions to take account of special problems of group and organizational consultation. (Benne, 1973)

This paper, which considers the standards to be met by a consultant, is a partial response to several of the issues facing individuals who act as organizational consultants. The issues confronted by an individual are as variable as are the types of organizations utilizing a consultant; but these issues can be grouped into five general principles. The principles are: (1) the communication consultant must be objective and unbiased in his/her interaction with the client; (2) the communication consultant must maintain high standards of professional competence; (3) the communication consultant must maintain strict standards of confidentiality; (4) the communication consultant must be familiar with the ethical standards of his/her profession; and (5) the communication consultant must accept responsibility for the consequences of his/her consulting practices.

Benne, and others (Eich, 1977; Huber, 1977), have suggested there is a need for the development of an ethical code for organizational consultants. Eich (1977) surveyed organizational communication practitioners and concluded that ninety-two percent of the 271 respondents ". . . agree with the statement that departments of communication should provide training for future communication consultants." More to the point for this discussion is his suggestion, based on eighty-two percent of his sample, that ". . . ICA or the Academy of Management should develop a code of ethics for communication consultants." This feeling of a need for a code of ethics is not limited to professionals in speech communication. A survey for Business Week, of managers at Pitney-Bowes and Uniroyal, revealed that ninety percent ". . . backed a code of ethics for business and the teaching of ethics in business schools." Those surveyed indicated that the managers ". . . want to believe their particular job can be done with a high degree of ethics."

We feel that it is entirely appropriate for SCA to take the forefront in the development of an ethical code for the organizational consultant. The following

discussion of the five principles is advanced toward that end.

Principle I: The communication consultant must be objective and unbiased in his/her interaction with the client. As more individuals enter into full or part-time consulting activities it becomes increasingly important to establish guidelines for approaching the client organization. It is assumed that ethical considerations are part of this statement. There are two sub-topics to be considered in this discussion: how objectivity and honesty are maintained and what happens in a conflict of values situation.

A consultant has an obligation to exercise honesty, objectivity, and diligence in the performance of his/her duties and responsibilities. (Certified Internal Auditors, 1974). As with most homilies, it is far easier to preach objectivity than to maintain it in a consultant-client relationship. One thought that should remain uppermost in our minds is that we do not always possess the remedy for the ills of an organization at our fingertips. It is far too easy to assume that because we are trained in communication, management, personnel, psychology, etc., we can diagnose the corporate ailment before consultation with the patient. This is as foolhardy as the physician who makes a diagnosis over the telephone and then prescribes medication without seeing the patient. True, it is faster, cheaper, presents the consultant in an omnipotent pose; but, it is neither objective nor unbiased.

This objective outlook is also indicative of the personal attitude of the consultant. If we feel that we must have an immediate answer for everyone of the client's questions, then that is a heavy burden for us to bear and encourages those responses that tend to fit all corporations into a three or four part typology for analysis and rectification. It is often difficult to retain the standards of objectivity and lack of bias when faced with a situation of conflicting values. If, for instance, a potential client expects the consultant to be an organizational "hit man," this should result in a values conflict. It is easy enough to rationalize the therapeutic nature of purging the corporation of unhealthy elements and the essentially remedial nature of this task as a means to an end that may be constructive. Viewed from another perspective however, the decision might be to terminate the

contact with the client. To minimize these conflicts it is advisable to clearly delineate what a consultant is and is not willing to assume as part of the contract for his/her services.

As long as we remember that we are responsible for the decisions we make, the recommendations we advance, and the changes we instigate, and that the responsibility is a lighter burden if we have been as objective and straightforward with the client as possible, then we are effective exemplars of our profession.

Principle II: The communication consultant must maintain high standards of professional competence by providing only those services for which they have been uniquely trained. The consultant must accurately represent his/her area of expertise without attempting to "over-sell" qualifications. Eich's (1977) survey of communication consultants indicated that 50% of the respondents, identified exaggeration of expertise as an unethical practice on the part of their colleagues. His data seems to "reflect a concern that consultants are overselling personal expertise and playing on the client's trust to the detriment of the communication field."

As an emerging profession, communication consultants must be especially cautious not to accept contracts that require skills they do not have since the very legitimacy of the profession may be at stake. A difficulty already experienced by many communication consultants arises when the consultant allows the client to expect more in terms of outcome than the consultant can deliver. The field of communication can be so broadly defined by the consultant so as to imply expertise in areas as diverse as the design of video systems to organizational development to improving executive public speaking skills. As Walton and Warwick (1973) point out, a consultant may be competent in a particular specialty but "fails to tailor the intervention to the needs of the situation. The practitioner who relies heavily on preprogrammed or prepackaged interventions may unwittingly define the problem in ways that meet his/her own constraints of time and competence." Far too often communication consultants claim a larger than life competency area when in actual practice they continue to use the same basic communication skills workshop under a variety of different titles.

Gordon Lippitt, an internationally known management consultant, expresses this same concern when he cautions clients on the selection of consultants. He believes that a sure sign of a non-professional is the attempt to "indicate that he is not only a financial genius but an expert behavioral scientist, knowledgeable in quantitative methods, and all other management sciences. . . . Be wary of the consultant who unreasonably implies expansive knowledge and experience; he/she may be venturing far beyond the limits of his/her actual skills and abilities" (1972).

Professional consultants must not only fairly represent their competencies but also be willing to continually upgrade and in-service themselves and their colleagues. Sponsorship of such continuing educational programs for members of our own discipline have already been suggested (Blankenship, 1978 and DeWine and Eadie, 1978) and proposals for the integration of such a program into a credentialling procedure is being discussed at this convention.

The primary concern should be the protection of the client. As a profession it is our responsibility to provide potential clients with the most accurate information available regarding expertise and services. To do less will seriously damage the future potential of other communication consultants.

Principle III: Communication consultants must maintain strict standards of confidentiality. Information about the client gained during the course of the consultation relationship cannot be communicated to others unless the client has specifically agreed to such disclosure. This restriction would of course also apply to any research efforts on the part of the consultant. The consultant must keep any results from consulting practices anonymous to protect both himself as well as the client. The American Psychology Association suggests that "information received in confidence is revealed only after most careful deliberation and when there is clear and imminent danger to an individual or to society and then only to appropriate professional workers or public authorities" (1977). Every effort must be made to protect the client's right to privacy not only on ethical grounds but for legal considerations as well.

Some consultants attempt to prove their diverse background as a consultant by citing as examples former organizations for whom they have worked. They may point out techniques and solutions used by these organizations as a method of demonstrating how some solution works. This use of former clients as examples of consulting results, will certainly lead the new client to wonder if he/she will be that consultant's next subject in a story of consulting success or failure. A professional does not violate the confidence of individuals or organizations in talking with clients.

Principle IV: The communication consultant must be familiar with the ethical standards of his/her profession. As more individuals become active in consulting projects, the visibility of organizational consultants increases. Concomitant with this heightened awareness of our existence is closer scrutiny of our professional ethics.

Professional ethics can be defined as standards of conduct unique to a particular profession and those who practice it. (Huber, 1977) Of course, it is often difficult to separate professional ethics from personal ethics as they are interwoven; but the discussion will center on acceptable professional standards. It is not the purpose of this section to offer pat solutions to ethical problems but to identify some areas of concern in communication consulting.

There are at least two areas of concern: moral and legal practices. Most corporations and professional associations have statements of acceptable behavior for their employees. These statements frequently mention that individuals should not accept gifts or costly entertainment from those with whom they do business (Catepillar, 1974), or receive material gain from their association with other companies (American Independent Oil Company, 1974). These statements are as applicable to the communication consultant as to the corporate employee. A consultant is often in a position to profit from information received while on the job, or to provide information to others. Not only is this a breach of confidentiality (as discussed elsewhere in this paper) but it also violates the client-consultant relationship. It is important that a consultant be able to distinguish between professional and personal relationships, and keep them separate.

To aid in developing the skills necessary to separate professional and personal relationships and to recognize ethical conflict situations, it would be advisable for us to move in two main directions: pre-service and in-service training of consultants (Benne, 1973). As Benne suggests, making valid distinctions on ethical issues is a learned rather than a natural ability and this ability can be learned in pre-service training when future consultants are confronted by situations which involve ethical choices. The in-service education takes the form of continuing workshops, conferences, and clinics for consultants.

With respect to legal issues it must be clear that a consultant operates in strict observance of both the letter and spirit of applicable law. In those situations where there are no applicable legal principles, a consultant must conduct him/herself in such a manner that no one would be embarrassed if the full facts were disclosed -- in this way even the appearance of impropriety will be avoided. (Southeast Banking Corporation, 1975).

The American Psychological Association, in their Third Principle on moral and legal standards, establishes that an individual's moral, legal, and ethical standards of behavior are a personal matter, except as they may compromise the fulfillment of their professional responsibilities, or reduce the trust by the public. The application of this statement to communication consultants is obvious -- we are in a position to adhere to established normative behavior and thereby increase the worth of the consulting profession or to damage the esteem in which it is held by interested others. We are the only ones who can make the decision.

Principle V: The communication consultant must accept responsibility for the consequences of his/her consulting practices. The consultant needs not only ethical standards to govern the effect of outcomes generated by his/her interventions but legal protection as well. While it is important that the client take ownership for his/her part in the problem, the consultant must take ownership for potentially making the problem worse. An internal consultant will be more aware of the result of such action since he/she must live with any actions taken while an external consultant can leave the situation.

Along with accepting responsibility for the outcome of the consulting interaction the communication consultant must be ready to terminate a consulting relationship when it is reasonably clear that the client is not benefiting from it. Consultants must be sensitive to the use clients make of data collected as well as programs developed. If these results are not being used for the benefit of the client then the consultant must make his/her observations to the client and propose modification or termination of the contract. It is also the responsibility of the consultant to establish some form of follow-up procedure so that outcomes can be checked for impact at a later date. Many training designs use the resources of the participants to establish the interdependence of the group and also increase available sources of gain. The intent is to tap the resources within the group and to remove the consultant from the central position in relation to the learning process. This collaboration mode of consultation increases ownership of positive results on the part of the client and places the responsibility for failures on those most directly responsible for services. The establishment of a support system to continue working with consulting outcomes long after the consultant has left the site and terminated the contract, has been suggested by a variety of authors (Margulies, 1971, Kurpius, 1976).

The final step in any consulting contract is the evaluation of the consultation. With appropriate follow-up a continual re-evaluation of the program is designed so as to maintain continuance. The intent is to establish a permanent evaluation system that will maintain the expansion of the support system and will evaluate the outcome of the program as it changes across time. The evaluation process should measure not only the outcome variables but the process used to achieve these outcomes as well.

The consultant must be aware of the impact his/her presence has had on the organization. With the beginning of the entry stage the consultant has effected change in the organization. Establishment of the initial contact with the organization is in itself an intervention into that organization and must be considered a part of the outcome generated from the consulting contract. Therefore, consultants must be constantly aware of the impact of their own behavior on the total organizational structure. The intent

of their own behavior is not as significant as the actual impact that behavior has on individuals in the organization. A consultant who ignores his/her part in the changes caused by the consultant-to-organization interaction, is not only behaving unethically but incompetently as well.

Conclusion

The fact that as a discipline we have yet to establish ethical standards for practitioners has not limited the number of communication specialists entering the consulting profession. Nor is this paper intended to suggest such a restriction. What we have attempted to do is raise some important issues regarding the use and misuse of consulting practices and suggest potential standards the profession should endorse. It is our hope that communication consulting will become more professional with an appropriate code of ethics and thus lend credibility and legitimacy to the field. What we need is a balance between standards that are too idealistic to achieve, and a lack of any code of ethics by which to measure consulting activities. As Lippitt suggests, "A list of the professional capabilities of a consultant is extensive. It looks like a combination of the Boy Scout law, requirements for admission to heaven, and the essential elements for securing tenure at an Ivy League college...However, if we have consultants with the preceding values and attitudes we may yet re-institute a confidence in consultants as fellow human beings whose help derives from a process that provides mutual growth for both parties."

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